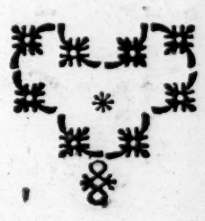


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AN
ESSAY
ON THE
Force of Imagination
IN
PREGNANT WOMEN.

ADDRESSED TO THE LADIES.



LONDON,
Printed for R. BALDWIN, No. 47, Pater-noster-Row.
M DCC LXXII.
[PRICE ONE SHILLING.]



TO THE
L A D I E S.

L A D I E S,

BEING convinced from deliberate reflections, that the imagination of pregnant women, can make no impression on the form of the foetus: and, being witnesses to
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much unhappiness from adopting the contrary opinion, I was led to collect my thoughts on the subject, and throw them on paper.

As it is a subject, under some circumstances, of very great importance to the fair sex, I am induced to address myself to them in particular; in hopes such address may engage an attentive perusal; from whence, I flatter myself, I shall be the means of alleviating those anxious fears raised by prejudice, and but too generally attendant on the pregnant state.

Sensible

Sensible that physical, and anatomical disquisitions cannot be pleasing to the fair sex, I have intentionally avoided them as much, as the explanation of my subject would admit, nor do I think my cause has in the least suffered from such conduct, as, exclusive of their assistance, my design is answered, without fatiguing the ladies with perhaps at best but groundless conjecture.

In what I have advanced, I have taken reason for my guide; and have attempted to deliver its dictates with clearness, and precision.

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How far my endeavours have succeeded, I submit, ladies, to your decision.

And am,

With all due deference and respect,

THE AUTHOR.

A N
E S S A Y
O N T H E

Force of Imagination, &c.

TH A T the imagination of pregnant women is capable to mutilate or deform the fœtus, is an opinion of a very ancient date, and has been supported by the sentiments of the young, and old, wise, and unwise for several centuries past. The ill effects of adopting this erroneous doctrine, I shall forbear to enlarge
B on.

on. If I prove it to be built on irrational superstitious notions, the intent of the following pages will be sufficiently answered.

Preparatory to this intention, I beg leave to observe, “by imagination I understand (as Pope and Gay express it) that power which forms ideal or mental pictures;” this I apprehend is taking the word in its utmost latitude; and, under this acceptation, we are to consider its effects, as they may tend to external objects; or, as they may influence the animal machine.

It will require very little force of argument to shew how ineffectual is the power of imagination, unassisted, to influence, or obtain any change on external objects.

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The utmost exertion of its force can neither deprive the loadstone of its attraction, prevent the vegetation of plants, or stop the descent of rain. For, in spite of our most ardent wishes, nature's laws will be predominant; the loadstone will attract, plants will vegetate, and rain descend.

Could imagination screen us from want, whose wants would be unsupplied? the miser would no longer have an object for his avarice, the ambitious would possess the extent of his ambition ; and every man arrive to the summit of his wishes.

The impotency of ideal conceptions being so glaringly obvious, it would be an insult to our understanding to suppose any change, either designed, or unintended, could take

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place

place on external objects; respecting their form, bulk, substance, or position, without some intervening power. Hence then to form an object concurring with our ideas, requires an assistance found only in art. By the intervention of this, we are enabled to assist or prevent the effects of nature, though to pervert the system, baffles all human invention.

Being convinced of the inability of ideal conceptions to produce any change on external objects, it naturally occurs to consider what influence the imagination has over the human machine.

To attempt the discussion of this consideration in its full extent would lead me into a labyrinth of philosophic theories, doubts, and disputations.

tations. The passions of the mind are an inexhaustible fund for philosophical inquiries. Every day some instances are to be observed where anger, grief, joy, and surprize have produced astonishing changes in the human constitution: nevertheless, these effects remain inexplicable by the narrow limits of our physiological knowledge. Hence then I shall limit this consideration to the point in question, viz. the influence of the imagination on the fœtus.

To judge of the propriety of what is hereafter to be advanced on this subject, it is necessary some idea should be formed of the connections consisting between the mother and embryo.

The fœtus, or embryo during its stay in the womb, is enveloped in a
peculiar

peculiar set of membranes (of a vascular, spongy texture) aggregately termed the burden : from the attachment the burden forms to the womb subsists a constant circulation of blood between the mother and child.

This attachment is formed by an adhesion of the spongy cells of the burden, to the veins and arteries of the womb ; one series of the vessels contained in the burden, being filled by means of its attachment to the womb with blood from that organ, after a variety of convolutions, empty their contents into the veins, forming a part of the umbilical cord, or navel-string. This cord, passing from a certain place in the burden, enters the body of the foetus at the navel; from whence, by wonderful mechanism, the blood is transported to e-

very part of the fœtus, and vessels destined for that purpose. To preserve a constant and free circulation, without which the fœtus must suffer, the blood is returned from the child to the arteries of the navel-string, from whence it is dispersed into the burden ; and, passing into the spongy cells connected to the womb, enters the circulation of the mother ; and hence between her and the child the intimate connection subsists. The ill consequences attending a detachment of the spongy cells of the burden from the womb, are too obvious to need mentioning : to prevent them, comes not only under the province of the physician, but the prudent care of every one.

The physician will tell you that a distention of the blood-vessels from
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a preternatural fulness, or a relaxation from emptiness; an undue velocity in the circulation, or too great languor, are all capable of separating the burden from the womb; consequently, are all capable of producing abortion and miscarriage.

Your own good sense, ladies, will inform you that fear, grief, anxiety, joy, or surprize, will retard or accelerate the circulating fluids, according to the actuating motive; hence, from these passions, miscarriages frequently ensue: and give me leave to add, this is the greatest effect the foetus can experience from the power of imagination.

On a review of the connection subsisting between the mother and child, together with a reflection on the natural properties and use of the blood
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in adults, it is very apparent nature intended this circulation, solely for the nutrition and perfection of the fœtus. From the similitude of its office, I think it may very aptly be compared to water, poured on a plant or seed, without which, neither the plant would thrive or the seed vegetate. The seed of a plant put into water, will by the assistance of a due degree of warmth and moisture, vegetate and produce a plant bearing the same characteristic marks, as that from which the seed was gathered. The good or ill quality of the earth, the abundance or deficiency of water, the proper or improper temperature of the air, will affect the seed in no other way, than either totally suppressing its vegetation, or causing it to shoot forth in a more or less

C healthy

healthy state, as its nutritive essentials, earth, air, and water, were better, or worse adapted for vegetation in the species of plant.

The characteristic marks of the plant all spring from that small atom, the seed ; this particle is from the positive laws of nature decreed to shoot forth into such marks, colours, and fibres, as the plant from which it was gathered is distinguished. The proper nourishment, as I said before, that is necessary to vegetation, consists of a due mixture and temperature of the earth, air, and water. Notwithstanding any defect that may occur in these nutritive principles, the seed, when it vegetates, will produce the characteristic marks of the plant, though in an unhealthy aspect. To an impregnated woman,

it is ordained, by the same dispensing power, to produce an offspring bearing the characteristic marks of the human race. It is the office of the circulation, passing between the mother and child, to afford nourishment to the embryo ; as it is the office of the elements to produce vegetation in the vegetable kingdom.

Should sickness, anxiety, or any cause whatsoever, debilitate the constitution of the woman, the circulating fluids being thoroughly rendered incapable of affording proper nourishment ; abortion, or the birth of a weakly, puny child, will be the consequence. But the defects in the mother's constitution, from whatever cause they may arise, can no more alter the original form the foetus was endued with, than earth, air, and

C 2 water,

water, assisted with all the art of man, is capable to produce the flower of a rose from the seed of a thistle. The inference I draw from this similitude, serves only to corroborate this indisputable fact, viz. the organization of the embryo from the hour of impregnation; a fact every one tacitly acknowledges, who adopts the opinion, that impressions are made on the fœtus by the force of imagination. Such impressions are said to be produced instantaneously, and not confined to any term of pregnancy.

The defects of a leg, toe, arm, or finger, have been ascribed to a sudden surprize on seeing objects in that lamentable state. The very supposition tacitly implies the fœtus was once perfectly formed, or rather
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that the parts were, previous to the surprize, in a natural state. If then the loss of a member is thus suddenly accomplished, I should wish to know how the hæmorrhage, which must necessarily ensue from the division of such parts, was restrained, and what became of the separated parts. For among all the tales I have heard relative to this subject, I do not recollect one that mentions the appearance either of an hæmorrhage, or of the separated part.

The impossibility, satisfactorily to answer these inquiries, would, I should think, sufficiently evince the absurdity of the supposition. But as these inquiries are unanswerable, to explain them is never attempted, because such an attempt, if impartially pursued, must raise a train of ideas
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that would inevitably destroy an opinion that, as it has been strongly inculcated by the prejudice of education, requires more trouble to divest ourselves of, than mankind in general choose to take. But to return more immediately to the subject.

We have seen that ideal conceptions can make no impressions on external objects; but as such we cannot consider the fœtus (from it's being so intimately connected with the mother). Let us view it then in its proper light, viz. organized matter, placed in the womb, there to be nourished, and brought to a certain degree of perfection, and then to be expelled.

We have observed, that the nutrition necessary to the perfection of
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the foetus, is obtained by the circulating fluids passing between it and the mother. Exclusive of these fluids, we know of no intercourse, consequently of no power, passing from the mother to the child, that can possibly be subservient to the mother's imagination. Hence then, if to mutilate or deform the foetus is the effect of the mother's imagination, the blood alone must be the immediate acting principle. Whether this principle has powers equal to the effects ascribed, let plain common sense decide; and when it reflects that blood is a smooth, oily fluid, will immediately acknowledge such consistence sufficiently demonstrates the blood's incapacity to mutilate the foetus, or impress any form imagination can devise.

Were

Were the form of the fœtus in the power of imagination, our offspring would be as subject to the capriciousness of mankind as our cloaths.

The form of the child's mouth, nose, eye, eye-brow, or any of its features, would as much depend on the reigning fashion, as the cut of a cap, coat, or any part of our drefs.

No fortunes would then be forfeited for deficiency of male heirs; nor uneasiness at the birth of a son, when the mother ardently longed for a daughter.

If the imagination could take off, or place on, the fœtus, a leg, toe, or arm, it could certainly remove all kind of blemishes. With such powerful

erful assistance, who would bear the deformity of wens, carbuncles, warts, &c. these being excrescences nourished by the circulating fluids, and connected to the patient by blood-vessels, as the fœtus is nourished and connected to the mother? If these fluids are so powerful in some cases, we may, from parity of reasoning, expect the same in other.

It is evident the imagination, unassisted, can have no manner of effect on external objects: that as the fœtus, from its situation, and intimate connection with the mother, is to be considered as part of her fabrick; yet, as to mark, or mutilate, requires a due degree of force; and the only power capable of conveying such force to the fœtus, in consequence of the imagination,

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is the blood ; I think it is a very obvious inference, that the imagination is as incapable of effecting any impression on the fœtus, as on any external body whatsoever.

From what has been advanced, I hope I have satisfactorily proved, the imagination can make no impression on the fœtus. I shall now proceed to shew, that the marks attributed to the force of imagination are effects proceeding from other causes.

The exact manner these marks are formed, is beyond the reach of my comprehension to explain. To convince you they are not the effects of the cause ascribed, let us convey our ideas to the vegetable and brute creation. In the former of these,

we seldom see a collection of apples, pears, plumbs, nuts, &c. but we discern some protuberance or deficiency in their respective form, something altogether out of the general course of nature. In the brute creation, it is by no means a very unfrequent occurrence to meet cats, dogs, sheep, &c. &c. dismembered, and impressed with the greatest variety of marks. Can we attribute these appearances to the force of imagination? We know of no such existence in the vegetable kingdom; and in the brute creation, under the form of instinct only. It is universally acknowledged, there is no satisfactory way to account for these appearances; we call them deficiencies or luxuriations of nature. If, then, nature proves deficient in the

productions of the animal and vegetable kingdom, by what system of logic are we to expect she will be infallible to the offspring of man?

Man claims a superiority over all other created beings, from his peculiar endowment, reason. This blessing constitutes his dominion. Nevertheless, the same omnipotent wisdom is observed in the mechanical structure of a fly, as in the formation of man. Hence we may conclude, that no peculiar providence is established for the perfection of mankind, beyond those laws of nature framed by the omnipotent Being for the perfection of every created object. When infants come into the world with narrow breasts, one shoulder higher than another, or with inverted feet, we do not always attribute

bute them to the force of imagination, but sometimes to inexplicable causes in nature. If thus we acknowledge nature protrudes some parts, and contracts others, I think it would be a greater proof of our reason to attribute all impressions and marks to the same source, than to believe the idle tales of ignorance and superstition. It has never been supposed the imagination could change the sex of the child; that has ever been deemed impossible: but the same chain of arguments that will convince us of the impracticability of such metamorphosis, must also convince us, that to mutilate or deform the fœtus by the same power is equally impracticable.

I shall next offer to your consideration a few thoughts on the longings,

ings, and strange ideas some pregnant women are possessed with. Strange as these ideas are, they are not, as is generally supposed, peculiar to pregnancy, but are to be observed in men and maidens. Whatever may be the cause, I think they are evidently the symptoms of a depraved taste or appetite.

Those conversant in the practice of physic, find it no very unusual thing for a patient (either in a fever, in an insane state of mind, or in the green-sickness, which is the most familiar) to crave after what, in an healthy state, they had conceived a great aversion to. Can we account for these cravings in any other way, than saying they are the symptoms of a vitiated taste, brought on by a disease in the circulating fluids? To believe

believe this a fact, (and that it is so, to me appears incontestable) we must immediately infer, that, as taste is a sense liable to be vitiated by an alteration in the circulating fluids, and as the disposition of the circulating fluids evidently becomes altered from impregnation, the desires and longings of pregnant women are to be considered, like those of men, the mere effects of a depraved or vitiated taste.

From what has been advanced, I hope, ladies, you are now sensible, no power of imagination can effect any mark or impression on the foetus. Nevertheless, I apprehend, though your reason may in this coincide with my opinion, yet the prejudice of education is so very predominant, that

that you cannot totally divest yourselves of the contrary opinion.

The many tales you have heard in its favour, has, as it were, fortified your mind against the convicting power of reason. To remove that barrier is a very difficult task, as it is not always in our power immediately to divest ourselves of those prejudices that have been adopted by our friends, and by them inculcated with our education.

To say that all the tales which have formed these prejudices, and told us by our ancestors with all the confidence of truth, believed by our prejudiced friends, who, to corroborate their father's, or grandfather's report, will attest similar occurrences to have happened within their own knowledge:

ledge: I say for me to declare all these tales are false and erroneous, would be deemed to their author's veracity the grossest insult, and in me such a step would appear the highest pitch of arrogance. To avoid the first, and wave the imputation of the latter, I shall only say as my private opinion; that our friends reason hath been misled; and either the histories have been misrepresented, or the events recorded in them, ignorantly accounted for. In defence of this opinion, I beg leave to produce some instances, wherein will appear the ignorant credulity of two of the greatest philosophers, as ever adorned the English nation.

The great Sir Francis Bacon attributes the cure of some warts he

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was afflicted with, to rubbing them with some lard, to which adhered the skin, which was afterwards exposed to a south wind.

The Hon. Mr. Boyle records as facts, among many other, the following histories.

A great lady (far from being credulous) confessed to me, as also did some of her servants, that with the common remedy of ash-ashes, formed by warm urine, into seven or nine cakes, and buried some days in a dunghill, she was cured of the yellow jaundice, after having passed thro' a tedious course of physic.

A physician afflicted with a marasmus, (a species of consumption) boiled an egg till it was hard, in his own urine ; and with a bodkin perforated the
the

the shell in many places, and buried it in an ant's hill; where, as the emmets devoured it, he found his strength return, and his disease decrease.

Riverius tells us, that the daughter of a great officer was excessively tormented with a whitloe, for which he ordered her finger to be put into the cat's ear, and within two hours after she was freed from pain.

These few instances I have selected, are such, that to believe them in the light these great men have shewn them in, no one in this age, who boasts common sense, unentrained with superstition, will pretend to. Nevertheless, they are told with a confidence of their veracity, and told by men of incontestable learning, and abilities.

abilities. From such authorities why do we discredit them ?

Because, that spirit of free enquiry, and general improvement, which distinguishes the present æra, has convinced us, (tho' the facts may be deemed indisputable) that neither exposing the lard's skin to a south wind; burying the seven, or nine cakes of ash-ashes under a dunghill; the destruction of the egg by the ants; or placing the finger in the cat's ear, effected the cure respectively ascribed to each.

The melancholy effects said to arise from the sting or bite of the tarantula, cured only by the charms of music, are almost universally believed, and too well-known to need a repetition; yet these effects are now
rejected

rejected by people of sense and discernment, as tales propagated by knavery and imposition. The existence of the tarantula is not doubted; but its bite, from experience, has been found attended with no other inconvenience, than would have ensued from the sting of a large gnat, or wasp.

The stories first told of the strange symptoms attending the bite of this spider, were undoubtedly raised to answer some sinister view. The credulous, superstitious multitude swallowed the bait; and thus have enabled the cheat to be carried on to this very day, by cunning vagabonds, who, taking advantage of the superstitious folly of the country, act, in confederacy with the fidler, (to excite
charity)

charity) the wild extravagant gestures, said to be the symptoms produced by the venomous bite of the tarantula.

This contradiction to the received opinion is now well attested; but I believe the united testimonies of all the learned in England, will never eradicate the contrary notions from the vulgar and illiterate.

In every age and clime, the crafty knave has found a multitude to receive his impositions. The powers of amulets and charms; the bottle conjuror; rabbit woman; Cock-lane ghost; witchcraft and fortune-telling, are perpetual testimonies of English credulity.

If we pass to our neighbours under the papal jurisdiction, we shall
 5 there

there find credulity in (if possible) a more glaring, absurd light. When we reflect on this prevailing folly of mankind; and that physick was once in the hands of priests, subjected to all the impositions paganism, ignorance and superstition could devise; we cannot wonder there should remain some tints of its former subordination.

Those who are wanting either of leisure or abilities to think for themselves in matters of science, are apt to place too great a faith in all that is told them: hence a continuance of error. And I think it is pretty obvious, while this oral tradition continues, there ever will be some, who will rely on the influence of the moon and stars; the powers of amulets and charms; and all such idle, unphilosophical notions.

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The same chain of ideas, that shews the impropriety of believing the cure of a tooth-ach by a charm; the destruction of warts, by turning thief, and stealing raw meat; the cure of the cramp, by wearing rosemary, or placing the soles of our shoes uppermost when we go to bed: I say, the same chain of ideas that shews the impropriety of believing these absurdities, will, when applied with a real desire to be informed, whether the imagination in pregnant women possesses the powers ascribed, convince the enquirer, that the tales told of the mother's imagination exerted on the fœtus, are a collection of falsities formed by superstition and ignorance, and continued by prejudice and credulity.

I have

I have now, ladies, finished my intended plan. Am sensible how difficult a task it is to remove deep-rooted prejudice : but, however unsuccessful my attempt may be to that purpose, my intentions, I flatter myself, are irreproachable : and if the arguments I have used, have not sufficient weight to induce my fair reader to adopt my opinion, they are such as will not incur her censure.

F I N I S.